

# Speech at a Conference on Open Dialogue in Bosnia and Herzegovina Organised by the Centre for Cultural Dialogue



Ladies and Gentlemen,

“Kind words unlock doors, and build bridges, while harsh words can hurt you more than a rifle can,” a folk saying says. There is no alternative to dialogue in society, and to build a healthy society it is necessary to have a civilized culture of dialogue.

The topic of today’s discussion, “the culture of dialogue”, underpins everything that we are trying to do in order to get Bosnia and Herzegovina back on the road to political and economic recovery and back on the road to Europe.

I hope that today’s discussion will be the beginning of a number of similar discussions that will gather together the political leaders throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina to explain their positions in a constructive atmosphere, to reach common ground, and thus help this country find a way out of the blind alley in which it is currently stuck.

The stakes are high. There is an opinion that different cultures cannot live together.

This view is a product of ignorance, and perhaps fear. If it

is not challenged it could gain ground.

The misery of the last twenty years has been caused by people who were convinced they *couldn't* live together.

It is increasingly clear that the solution is not in *harsh rhetoric* or in positions that reflect such rhetoric.

We are not going to reach sustainable solutions by throwing insults at the people on the other side of the conference table.

Nor are we going to build consensus by spreading invective through newspaper columns and TV current-affairs programmes.

I noted with interest the quote at the bottom of the invitation letter I received from the Centre for Cultural Dialogue.

The quote is: "I may be wrong and you may be right, but with effort, we may get nearer to the truth."

This is a celebrated maxim by the great liberal philosopher Karl Popper (born in Austria). It articulates wisely that even if one is right and the other is wrong, the truth may be somewhere in between.

But it's true that not everyone takes this enlightened view. So, what do we do when the other fellow *does* pound the negotiating table, or even worse, when the other fellow won't even *come* to the negotiating table?

Popper has sensible things to say about this too.

In his influential treatise, *The Open Society*, he argues that, I quote: "We should claim, in the name of tolerance, the right not to tolerate the intolerant. We should claim that any movement preaching intolerance places itself outside the law, and we should consider incitement to intolerance and persecution as criminal, in the same way as we should consider

incitement to murder, or to kidnapping, or to the revival of the slave trade, as criminal.”

So, in Popper’s opinion, we must try to create a culture of dialogue but also protect tolerance from intolerant people.

In the last three years, it seems that in Bosnia and Herzegovina the politics of spite and outsmarting, and the rhetoric of ethnic hatred have rocketed.

The consequences of this now stalk the country, and intolerant rhetoric is adding its own particular brand of poison to the contagion of unemployment and hopelessness.

You don’t have to be particularly wise to know what you want – even a small child knows what it wants. But, in order to understand what other people want, you need intelligence and patience.

The history of former Yugoslavia is crammed with failed politicians who only knew what they wanted.

Focusing exclusively on one’s own aspirations means that you do not have to accommodate your own interests to the interests of others; that means that you are not trying to look for results in which both sides win.

But in a functional democracy the only way to get what you want is to make sure that others get what they want too.

And that this is possible has been shown in the Europe that has been under construction for a long, long time – 50 years. Thinking about the European constitution, the Lisbon Treaty, started with a speech by Joschka Fischer exactly ten years ago. This was a difficult process, but everyone considered what they had to gain – and what *the others* had to gain, what *the others* wanted. That is how agreement was reached.

The ability to understand what others want and to find creative solutions for accommodating different goals is also

the key to prosperity and security.

In other countries, politicians try to look affable in public, and when they are behind closed doors they show their ruthless side and often disregard the normal courtesies.

Here in Bosnia and Herzegovina it seems to be the opposite.

Behind close doors, many – seemingly chauvinistic – political leaders have no problem treating leaders of other groups with respect, sharing jokes and reaching agreement on numerous issues. But, when they get in front of the media, they immediately strike a belligerent or perhaps an intolerant pose.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Some 14 years ago, Michael Steiner and I met an ambitious young politician from a small municipality north of Banja Luka.

That man impressed me then with his vision, energy and courage.

This politician, of course, was Milorad Dodik.

Despite great personal danger, he traveled abroad to meet Bosniak politicians and friends to discuss the future of their joint country once the war ended.

In my opinion, Milorad Dodik is an individual who had enormous influence on the peace process.

Many accuse him of increased use of extremist rhetoric, in terms of holding a referendum or denying war crimes such as the Markale market or Tuzla; and, more generally, in terms of the vocabulary of his political discourse, including the use of terms such as “Teheran” for Sarajevo.

Words have their significance and what is said cannot be

unsaid. Politicians should understand this more than anyone else. Impassioned rhetoric raises tensions, which in turn can escalate into violence.

Is this, I wonder, the same Milorad Dodik I met in 1996 together with Steiner? This is the question I want to ask. And if he is, what can he do so that we can attain the vision of a prosperous Bosnia and Herzegovina as the home of all its peoples, entities, minorities, ethnicities, which the young Milorad Dodik presented once so clearly. He even used to say that the inter-entity boundary line would vanish at some point of time.

Where does the talk about the referendum lead? Whose long-term interests are served by challenging international authority in Bosnia and Herzegovina? And what solutions that are satisfactory to all sides can the RS Prime Minister offer today to all the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina, regardless of where they live, and regardless of their ethnic or party backgrounds, in order to overcome this political stalemate at last?

I have already given credit to the organizers for the organisation of today's debate. And yet, it would not have been possible without Milorad Dodik, who came to Sarajevo to present his ideas and discuss the future of this country with you.

We will hear if the Dodik of the present is speaking, or still perhaps the Dodik of former times.

Thank you